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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS, S/CT, H
H PASS SFRC (JANNUZI)
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER KPAO TH
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: DECEMBER 8-9 VISIT OF STAFFDEL
JANNUZI TO SONGKHLA AND YALA

REF: A. BANGKOK 7573

1B. BANGKOK 7527
1C. BANGKOK 5965
1D. BANGKOK 2351

Classified By: DCM Alexander A. Arvizu. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) professional staffmember Frank Jannuzi visited the far southern Thai provinces of Songkhla and Yala as part of SFRC and Embassy Bangkok's ongoing effort to closely monitor the situation in that region. Jannuzi met with leading local government officials, businessmen, educators, Islamic community leaders, and conducted an outreach session with Muslim university students. Jannuzi heard concerns about deteriorating relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities; mixed assessments about the likely success of the NRC; how other factors -- especially narcotics -- might be influencing the violence; continued concern from Muslims over "unjust" treatment by the government; reassurances that outside elements have not yet become involved in the South; and negative impressions of the U.S.. Jannuzi emphasized that security forces should respect human rights norms despite frustrations with the justice system. END SUMMARY

12. (SBU) During a December 8-9 visit to the far southern provinces of Songkhla and Yala, SFRC staffmember Frank Jannuzi and Embassy Bangkok polooffs and ARSO met with Somporn Chibangyang, Governor of Songkhla; Netr Chantharasmi, NRC Member and prominent businessman; Dr. Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, Rector of the International Islamic University of Pattani (formerly Yala Islamic College); Police Major General Amporn Charuchinda, Commissioner of the 9th Region; and Prasit Meksawan, NRC member and prominent educator. Jannuzi also conducted an outreach program with Muslim students and teachers at the American Corner at Rajabhat Yala University. This was Jannuzi's third visit to the region (reftels C, D).

STATUS OF THE SITUATION

13. (C) We heard mixed views on the overall situation in the South. Police Major General Amporn Charuchinda, Police Region 9 Commissioner (responsible for all of southern Thailand), gave an optimistic assessment, claiming that incidents of violence had decreased over the past few months. Songkhla Governor Somporn agreed, boasting that the government had successfully contained the violence to the far southern provinces.

14. (C) Others were more pessimistic. Netr Chantharasmi, a prominent Sino-Thai businessman, said he and other NRC members believed the violence would increase and could possibly expand further north. Netr opined that secret RTG negotiations with separatist groups (reftel B) would be fruitless because the groups were too factionalized to be taken seriously.

ROLE OF THE SEPARATIST GROUPS

15. (C) Songkhla Governor Somporn and others downplayed the importance of specific separatist groups as the central factor of the violence. Somporn said that separatists were limited by small numbers, and exercised little real power on the ground. Police Major General Amporn Charuchinda believed that no individual separatist group could credibly claim to be behind the violence (reftel A). Reported that captured militants had little sense of belonging to a specific organization. Amporn said the cells they had been able to identify usually consisted of 4-6 members linked to other local militants through personal connections. Amporn said the militants' primary motivation was the traditional separatist agenda of a "liberated Pattani."

ROLE OF NARCOTICS

16. (C) During several of our meetings we heard suggestions that narcotics smuggling and traffickers were directly involved in some of the violence. Governor Somporn and Police General Amporn said their analysis suggested a link between drug smugglers and the violence. Amporn noted that following a successful major drug seizure there would inevitably be retaliatory attack on police -- that would then be labeled by the media as "separatist" related.

STILL NO INDICATION OF DIRECT OUTSIDE INVOLVEMENT

17. (C) None of our interlocutors believed that there is direct outside involvement in the South. General Amporn said that there was no evidence of international terrorist involvement in the South. However, there is evidence that outside money is going into southern Islamic schools. And international Jihadist propaganda, such as graphic DVD's from Chechnya, have been recovered in the region.

18. (C) While hearing no indication of outside involvement, we did hear concerns that it could become a reality. Netr Chantharasmi said that he and other NRC members feared that external elements could become involved. Police General Amporn reminded us that some of the militants had received training abroad. He said the police remained concerned that continued publicity of the strife in the South could bring in transnational groups.

NRC: SOME HOPE...

19. (C) Jannuzi met with three National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) members during his visit. Overall, they were cautiously optimistic about the progress of the commission. Dr. Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, Rector of the International Islamic University of Pattani (formerly Yala Islamic College), said that he and other NRC members had faith that NRC Chairman Anand Panyarachun would be able to convince Prime Minister Thaksin to adopt its recommendations. However, Japakiya suggested that without Anand's leadership the NRC had little chance of success.

110. (C) NRC member Prasit Meksawan, a prominent educator based in Yala, said the NRC would focus on "decentralization" rather than "autonomy," noting that addressing corruption and expanding education were also key factors. Prasit suggested that public support of the NRC from the U.S. would be important if the NRC was to eventually achieve success. He opined that Prime Minister Thaksin was particularly receptive to U.S. pressure/encouragement.

NRC: SOME DOUBT

111. (C) Other interlocutors offered more downbeat assessments of the NRC's chances for success. Songkhla Governor Somporn Chibangyang expressed his doubts about the NRC, noting that some of the NRC's recommendations might be incompatible with the need to suppress violence. The NRC members indicated that meetings are often contentious and that there was real animosity between RTG officials and civil society figures serving on the commission. Netr Chantharasmi complained that RTG officials had not been participating regularly in the NRC meetings. Prasit Meksawan agreed that there were internal difficulties within the NRC, and that many members were suspicious of the others. He said government members of the NRC were not acting independently and would only respond after receiving instructions from their leadership.

BUDDHIST AND MUSLIMS TENSION

112. (C) As in past visits to the South, Jannuzi heard concerns about deteriorating relations and rising tension between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the South. NRC member Netr Chantharasmi gave a pessimistic assessment on the state of relations between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in the South. He said the Emergency Decree, issued in July, illustrated the differences between the communities. Buddhists were overwhelming in favor of the measure and its security based approach while Muslims were overwhelmingly opposed. Dr. Japakiya opined that tensions between the two communities had been increasing.

113. (C) Again we heard anecdotal evidence that Buddhists were abandoning the far southern provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani and moving north. Netr Chantharasmi said mistrust was turning to "hate" between the communities. He said that his friends and relatives who lived in the three southernmost provinces felt increasingly insecure and were worried about direct attacks from Muslims.

114. (C) Our interlocutors pointed to the local schools as a prime example of growing divisions between the communities,

with several noting that Buddhist and Muslim students were increasingly segregated in different schools. Educator Prasit Meksuwan voiced particular concern over Islamic pondok schools which he felt isolated Muslims from the larger community. Dr. Japakiya said the separation of Buddhist and Muslim children in southern schools was emblematic of the breakdown in relations between the communities.

POLICE FRUSTRATION WITH LEGAL PROCESS

¶15. (C) During our meetings with the police we heard repeated expressions of frustration over the difficulty of convicting those believed to be involved in the violence. Police General Amporn complained of the difficulties in obtaining convictions of those believed to be carrying out the separatist attacks. He said that police have been frustrated in their efforts to recruit Muslims to serve in the police because many ethnically Malay-Thais cannot read Thai well enough to pass the entrance exams. Jannuzi emphasized to the police and Songkhla Governor Somporn that human rights norms should be respected when pursuing security measures despite these frustrations.

"INJUSTICES" REMAIN BASIS OF MUSLIM GRIEVANCES

¶16. (C) Jannuzi had an extended meeting with Dr. Japakiya, perhaps the most prominent Islamic scholar in southern Thailand (septel will provide additional details about Japakiya and the University). Japakiya emphasized how southern Muslims had been subject to years of "injustices" at the hands of the central government, and that local officials were not implementing central government policies designed to remedy these abuses. Japakiya said the feeling of "injustice" was the root cause of conflict between the Buddhist and Muslim communities. Japakiya complained that there had never been a Muslim governor in the Muslim majority provinces of the far South and noted that most civil servants assigned to the area were non-Muslims.

¶17. (C) Netr Chantharasmi agreed that Muslims complaints of "injustices" were justified to some degree. However, he said that recent government efforts to rectify these historical grievances had in turn alienated local Buddhists, because they believed Muslims were getting special privileges at their expense. Despite these feelings, our interlocutors uniformly believed that the Muslims' sense of grievances did not translate into widespread support for separatism.

U.S. SEEN NEGATIVELY

¶18. (C) We repeatedly heard that the U.S. was perceived negatively in the Muslim South and again heard outrageous, but often repeated, rumors that the U.S. was involved in the violence. Dr. Japakiya said that had to be careful that he not appear too "pro-American" in order to maintain credibility among southern Muslims. Lutfi suggested that the USG increase outreach efforts to the Islamic community and said he and his school would welcome exchanges with U.S. universities. Prasit Meksuwan commented that rumors of CIA involvement in the violence continued to be widely circulated and believed in the South. He said the U.S. was "losing the publicity battle."

COMMENT

¶19. (C) During our visit, we witnessed flooding that was affecting large parts of southern Thailand. The situation was not dire -- major roads were open and the larger towns were unaffected -- however, many people were clearly miserable because of water in their homes and fields. This was clearly an opportunity for the Thai government to win some "hearts and minds." However, they appeared to be missing the opportunity. We witnessed one instance of an Thai Army unit setting up tents for villagers whose homes were flooded, however, most people seemed to be making do on their own. We also heard from some of our contacts that the military wouldn't go into some affected villages because they feared attack. Rightly or wrongly, the perception of a lack of a RTG response to the flooding is viewed by many Muslims in the South as emblematic of the central government's attitude and treatment of them as second-class citizens. Actions (or lack of) such as these reinforce Muslim-Thai insecurities and resentment -- another example of the "injustices" we always hear about -- that exacerbates the growing divide between Buddhists and Muslims in the region.

END COMMENT
ARVIZU